

Burlington Business Association PlanBTV Position Statement September 30, 2012

As adopted by the Burlington Business Association Board of Directors

The mission of the Burlington Business Association (BBA) is to promote the economic vitality of Burlington. In the spirit of our mission, we offer the following feedback.

PlanBTV is an impressive document. It was born as the result of hard work and dedication. The BBA would like to commend the City of Burlington's Planning & Zoning Department and Planning Commission for the significant effort that went into PlanBTV.

PlanBTV identifies several economic development opportunities for the City of Burlington. We agree that these projects, if completed, would grow the grand list, give residents and tourists more reasons to visit Burlington and add some key services to the downtown core – all of which would promote economic vitality. However, while the PlanBTV draft does include a list of economic development projects and initiatives for the downtown core, its primary function does not seem to be as a comprehensive land use and development plan.

In order to strengthen the final version of PlanBTV, the BBA suggests the focus of PlanBTV be on comprehensive land use and development, relegating the following sections to be support for that focus: Burlington Values, and in Themes in Detail; Farm to City; Getting Around Town; Park it Burlington!; Making Connections and The Green Machine.

There are also sections in the draft PlanBTV document that, if included in the final plan, would reduce the rate of growth, threaten fiscal stability, and endanger the City's economic vitality. We are concerned that PlanBTV's lack of a prioritized list of initiatives and the breadth of topics it covers will reduce PlanBTV's efficacy as a guide for comprehensive land use and development in the downtown. This could have the effect of stunting growth, rather than encouraging it.

In order to strengthen the final Plan, we recommend that it be revised to address the following:

- prioritization of its recommendations, including a more specific vision;
- a clearer recognition of the high level of competition among communities in Chittenden County for commercial location and relocation (retail, restaurant, lodging, office, manufacturing, service and more), as well as

for residential development; noting the impact those factors have on Burlington's economic vitality;

- acknowledgement of the reality of today's workforce, residents, visitors and businesses – the vast majority of whom depend upon vehicles for the efficient movement of people, goods and services;
- acknowledgement of the geographic and demographic reality that Burlington is a very small city that sits in within a very rural state.

In addition, we have some specific areas of concern with the current draft document which include that:

1. The Market Study understates the significance of suburban competition – existing and future;
2. The Big Visions in the Around PlanBTV section identify specific city departments under each Element. The BBA suggests that PlanBTV encourage public/private partnership to work on these ideas, many of which cannot be accomplished without the involvement of both sets of stakeholders. This section may create the impression that the City of Burlington is capable of delivering all of these elements, which we feel is unrealistic.
3. While zoning regulations do at times drive land use, market forces drive land use with equal force. While PlanBTV calls for revised zoning regulations to reduce parking requirements for residential development, the reality is that real estate developers will only reduce parking requirements as far as market forces will support. While changes in zoning are important, they are not a panacea for reducing the need for parking in the downtown core.
4. The document does not address that our community is in the midst of an evolving discussion about the balance between commercial uses and social service facilities in the downtown core. We believe that the outcome of this discussion will have an impact on land use in our downtown core and the economic vitality of our downtown district, and that PlanBTV should include a section dealing with this important topic.

The section which disturbs the BBA the most is the section on Transportation and Parking, specifically the three sections entitled: Getting Around Town. Park It Burlington!, and Making Connections. These sections are focused chiefly on goals for improving the transportation system for pedestrians, bicycles, and transit, but downplay the need for a transportation system that serves vehicles. We take exception with the statement in PlanBTV which asserts that

“Pedestrians are King and Bicycles are Queen.” Absent is a seat in this “royal court” for vehicles!

We refer to the updated 2003 Transportation study that reports that:

- more than 3/4ths of people coming to Burlington arrive by car;

and we note that:

- commercial trucks deliver nearly all of the goods used by Burlington businesses and residents and also remove our garbage and carry all goods shipped out of the city; and
- the City of Burlington primarily uses vehicles to maintain and keep our city safe.

All of these vehicle uses compete for space on our roadways and in our parking spaces. We believe the draft of PlanBTV demotes the importance of all of these services and uses. And, while we recognize the importance of providing attractive alternative transportation options -- including improvements in public transportation and safe pedestrian and bicycle paths. And we acknowledge the need for a downtown that is safe and attractive for pedestrians after they leave their cars. We believe that PlanBTV does not acknowledge the realities of healthy commerce in our downtown or the way most of the workers and visitors arrive there, i.e. in private vehicles.

We hear repeatedly from business owners and employees that there needs to be more parking and improved access into, out of and about the city. BBA members, especially those businesses in the retail, hospitality and entertainment sectors have continually asked for an increase in the supply of parking spaces in the downtown area. Demands for additional parking need to be addressed and given high priority in PlanBTV. We believe that through careful and coordinated planning adding parking in the downtown core is compatible with other goals expressed in PlanBTV, and that together they will contribute to the City’s vitality, quality of life, health of residents.

Our city today and in the future must plan to effectively address sufficient parking supply; helpful directional and informational signage; a well-managed parking and transportation system that meets our users need for a convenient, clean, and safe experience; and a transportation system that promotes the smooth and steady flow of traffic into and out of the downtown core.

Specific concerns with the Transportation and Parking section include the following:

1. PlanBTV sets building new parking as a last resort, ignoring the findings of the 2003 Wilbur Smith Downtown Parking Study that concluded that 1540 additional parking spaces were necessary, even with effective TDM programs. Specifically PlanBTV states, “Given the current parking surplus, building new parking facilities in Burlington is a last resort. Nonetheless, when the current surplus is fully and efficiently utilized, building new parking facilities may be necessary.”

2. PlanBTV claims that there is a surplus of parking in Burlington. We agree that there is some level of a surplus, but disagree with the extent to which the available surplus that can be managed. We submit that the 1,453 spaces located in Private/Private parking areas should not be counted as part of the “surplus” since we know from our membership that most, if not all of these spaces are leased for use or held open for customers between the hours of 7am and 7pm at a minimum. It is impractical to manage this parking resource in a way that will be efficient and have significant impact on the demand for more parking in the downtown.

3. We feel the “Complete Streets” model needs to be applied in locations where access by other users such as pedestrians and bicycles is significantly restricted. Most of our downtown streets are narrow with short blocks and ample crossing and use opportunities. The concept of Complete Streets is best applied to streets with more than two lanes and areas of higher traffic volumes and speeds. Sections of Battery, Winooski, and Main Streets meet these criteria. We believe that applying a Complete Streets plan to other streets unnecessarily constricts flow and adds to congestion.

4. Converting car parking spaces to bike parking shouldn’t be our first resort for creating more bicycle parking. We acknowledge that there is a need for seasonal bike parking but, don’t believe that the streetscape is the best place for bicycle parking. There are other opportunities to place bicycle parking on city-owned and private land in the downtown core, which we would like PlanBTV to acknowledge.

5. When discussing removing/not growing parking and implementing Complete Streets in the downtown it is important to consider all factors including the lost opportunity cost of on-street parking in areas of high retail/restaurant uses.

6. We feel the User Experience section needs to address two of the keys to a good experience with downtown parking, safety and cleanliness. In addition to technology and ease of access, we believe PlanBTV needs to address the need for cleaner garages that users perceived to be safe.

7. Convenience is a key factor in transportation decisions made by users. PlanBTV should mention the importance of convenience to users -- shoppers, office workers, visitors and residents – who highly value convenience and

typically make transportation decisions based on their need for convenience. PlanBTV acknowledges this when it states. “being car-free in downtown Burlington requires a level of sacrifice, creativity and determination that can stifle even the most planet-loving citizens.”

As the Voice of Burlington business, we at the Burlington Business Association welcome dialogue on the concerns that we have presented here. The BBA is also open to exploring how public/private partnerships can play a lead role in moving forward the economic development opportunities identified in PlanBTV. With some reworking of sections of PlanBTV; most specifically those related to parking and transportation, the BBA believes that PlanBTV can serve our community well as a vision for our future.